

How Public Schools Indoctrinate Kids Without Almost Anyone Noticing

Teaching the value of free thought matters now more than ever. Unfortunately, most American public schools take the opposite approach.

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By [Auguste Meyrat](#) OCTOBER 26, 2018 The Federalist

Many people have long suspected that governments sometimes attempt to indoctrinate their people to increase the government's own power and influence. Unfortunately, ambitious governments will not stop at merely controlling what their people can do; they must control their minds.

Indoctrination happens through many channels—entertainment, speeches, and censorship—but its main instrument is the school system. Teachers have a captive audience of malleable young minds for several years. They may not have figured out how to make students smart and productive, but they can at least make them submissive and obedient.

Judging by results and from most people's experience, indoctrination is not only a problem with rogue regimes, but also a distinctly American problem. However, here it is difficult to determine the extent of indoctrination, how it works, or even if it does work.

Most Americans might receive a mediocre education, but this education may be so mediocre that the intended brainwashing might not even be effective. True, some will feel the Bern and join the Socialist Party, and others will become feminists and [beat up women who protest abortion](#). A precious few may even become conservatives. Most, though, seem content to remain disengaged from politics, religion, and most ideas in general, and allow the mainstream media to think for them.

Far from resembling a unified collective, society has become more polarized and tribal. Some might see this as evidence of the failure of indoctrination, and the

insuppressible human desire for freedom and justice, but they are mistaken. Indoctrination does work, and it is one the main reasons America is so divided.

What Is Indoctrination?

Few people seem to have a clear definition of indoctrination, and thus call anything they dislike indoctrination (e.g., “Leftists professors are indoctrinating their students,” “Those fundamentalist Christians are indoctrinating their kids,” or “Facebook is indoctrinating its users.”).

While indoctrination involves pushing a certain opinion, it is also much more. It is the comprehensive effort of passively disseminating a particular viewpoint. The passive aspect is key. People who are indoctrinated with a certain narrative or ideology do not arrive at the intended conclusions through their own thinking, but hear the same thing repeated in a million different ways until they finally take it as unquestionable truth.

Because indoctrination happens in the absence of thinking, many teachers who engage in indoctrination do so unconsciously. They themselves take what they’re given and pass it along without thinking. Ideologues often intervene at this level by writing the scripts for teachers, which is how [LGBT advocacy](#) and [anti-Semitic fabrications](#) become included in their lessons.

Thoughtlessness is essential. As the fictional demon Screwtape, from C.S. Lewis’s “The Screwtape Letters,” [states](#) in his letters to Wormwood, “It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out.” A person who really thinks will eventually reason himself out of the things he heard at school.

In some ways this could be good—he could reason his way out of utopian thinking that contradicts reality. It could also be bad—he could reason his way out of superstitious beliefs, but not have the wherewithal to take the next step of [adopting reasonable beliefs](#).

For this reason, it is often fruitless for Republican politicians to insist on [incorporating more conservative viewpoints](#), or for conservative intellectuals to decry [bias in U.S. history classes](#), or for classical schools to replace Maya Angelou with Tacitus. If students are still receiving the material passively, a switch of content will not help, and, in the case of introducing classic literature, it will usually backfire. English teachers have soured multiple generations of Americans on Shakespeare because they taught it as propaganda, not as dense texts requiring complex thought.

Indoctrination In Common Core

Even changing curriculum will not prevent indoctrination. Curriculum should help guide the teacher to create lessons and use materials that will train the students to think and function independently. Instead, most public school curricula, [either adopting the Common Core standards or imitating them](#), do the opposite.

Common Core has facilitated progressive indoctrination by smothering independent thought and stifling intellectual development. It effectively trains students not to think by emphasizing skills over content, process over product, and relative standards over absolute ones.

The [humanities suffer](#) the most from the focus on teaching supposedly practical skills rather than quality content. Instead of reading great poetry and literature, English teachers asked their students to read more journalistic nonfiction and develop research skills. Instead of reading for meaning and writing clearly, students read for bias and learn to write fluff.

History teachers now teach their students “history skills,” which involve everything except remembering actual history and synthesizing information. Consequently, both literary and historical content is drained of relevance or meaning. While students learn to process data, they do not think about anything in particular.

Math and science are hurt more by Common Core's obsession with the process over the product. Reaching the right answer means little in Common Core math. It is more important that students learn various arbitrary methods through which they can arrive at an answer. Students receive more credit for following a needlessly complicated breakdown, complete with color-coding and an array of abstract terms, for relatively simple computation. Word problems also loom large, causing teachers to spend less time on their subject and more time teaching students to highlight the right terms.

Needless to say, some students can make their way through the Common Core curriculum without knowing much math or science at all. Common Core proponents will say that this teaches students "metacognition"—thinking about thinking—and pushes students to learn how to learn. In reality, kids stop thinking, since it's all pointless.

These two problems come together to bring about a pervasive relativism in education. Content is interchangeable and mastery is either illusory or impossible. Knowledge becomes subjective. One text is as good as another. One period of history is as important as another. One theory or formula is as useful as another. It is hard to learn how to think when there is nothing real to think about.

In such a system, thinking is only the articulation of opinion; it has no bearing on truth. This means that people don't really need to think critically and understand why they believe what they do. They just need to have the right viewpoint and force others to conform like they've been forced to conform. They engage in arguments where the loudest voice wins because no one's points are better than another. They pressure instead of persuade.

This, in turn, leads to tribalism—groups of people united in feeling and opinion, but not in reason and truth. The lack of thought makes all these groups vulnerable to mass media and prevents any organized resistance to an encroaching state or lawless ideologue in power. Indoctrination is complete when perception (i.e., whatever is on the screen, whatever an "expert" says,

whatever is popular) really does become reality for most people because they're too stupid or apathetic to respond rationally.

Good Teaching Is The Cure For Indoctrination

The only real solution to indoctrination, then, is good teachers. Good teachers (which include parents, mentors, and other knowledgeable adults) train students in methods of thought while supplying the stuff of thought. They teach a person to evaluate an argument properly, find actual solutions to problems, and determine what is true and what is false.

More importantly, they don't succumb to promoting one ideology over another because they trust their student to reason through to the right position. This was St. Augustine's argument in "On Christian Doctrine" (back when indoctrination meant teaching, not brainwashing), in which he recommended the inclusion of pagan learning in Christian education, trusting in the rational faith of the Christian scholar to handle it properly.

Only clear thought will be the death of foggy indoctrination. If people want to pass on their ideas on to the next generation, they should focus on building up logic, not just giving them the right texts to read and TV shows to watch. The goal should be to understand the reasons, not follow the signals of the right tribe.

At some point, indoctrination will always collapse on itself and leave mediocrity in its wake. Teaching, by contrast, is what will sustain our culture and bring out its virtues. It fosters the presence of active thought--not uniform thought--and it is what will ultimately mend and civilize our sorely divided country.

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